News Release

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Immediate Investment in Legal Aid Needed

Corner Brook, Newfoundland – Justice and equality will soon be nothing more than words in a dictionary instead of a way of life for thousands of low-income Canadians who find themselves before the courts. The federal government is being urged to commit to long term, stable and adequate legal aid funding in order to avoid stripping away the legal rights of the poor.

"Without a commitment for continued investment from the federal government, many legal aid programs may be forced to close the books on key services that help ensure the most vulnerable residents have access to justice," says Nancy Brown Medwid, Chair of the Association of Legal Aid Plans of Canada, and executive director of Legal Aid Alberta.

The association is calling on the federal government to live up to its responsibilities by enhancing federal funding for existing criminal legal aid programs and providing new funding for family legal aid services.

"Committing to stable and adequate funding for legal aid would send a message to Canadians that this government is committed to ensuring our justice system is fair, equal, and accessible for all Canadians, and not just those who can afford it," says Brown Medwid.

Nick Avis, Chair of the Newfoundland & Labrador Legal Aid Commission agrees. "Adequate legal aid funding may not be the stuff that wins or loses elections, but it speaks to our national values of justice, equity and fairness for all Canadians, especially those in need," he says.

The uncertain future of federally funded programs that have improved legal aid services over the past few years is just one example of the pressing need for federal action, says Avis. "At the moment, funds are committed only to March 2007," he explains. "Without ongoing funding, it's possible we could lose these programs – and once they are lost, it becomes much harder to try to bring them back later on."

Legal aid programs in Canada are not the only ones concerned. During the Canadian justice ministers' conference in Corner Brook Newfoundland, the provincial and territorial ministers are putting forward the Resolution on Legal Aid. The ALAPC supports this resolution and calls on the federal government to commit to long-term and enhanced funding of these services.

Background:
The Association of Legal Aid Plans of Canada supports the Resolution on Legal Aid put forward by the provincial and territorial justice ministers. The association calls on the federal government to:

- Commit long-term funding to the Federal Investment Fund. Established in 2003, this three-year initiative has resulted in improved access to criminal legal aid services, as each province and territory created new programs to help low-income people. Without an ongoing funding commitment from the federal government, this work cannot be sustained.
- Provide funding for civil legal aid, particularly for services which are federally mandated or legislated, such as divorce, Employment Insurance, and Canada Pension Plan issues.
- Increase funding to cover the additional demand for legal aid services and/or costs resulting from the federal government's proposed criminal justice system changes (e.g., concerning conditional sentences, minimum penalties) and by increases in federal prosecutions and policing resources.

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The Association of Legal Aid Plans of Canada (ALAPC) represents legal aid programs in all provinces and territories. These plans are charged with providing legal services to those who cannot afford to hire a lawyer. The association exchanges information and views about legal needs and services, and discusses material problems and developments in the various plans as well as those aspects of legal aid and related public issues that are of national interest. It is responsible for the reciprocity agreement that governs how each plan provides legal aid in civil matters that cross provincial/territorial lines.